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ABSTRACT

This issue of the ACEA resource series focuses on the role of sociodramatic play in early childhood development, giving recommendations and examples for developing children's social understanding through play. Sections include the following: (1) "Developing Understanding through Play," which introduces the concepts; (2) "Complex Sociodramatic Play," discussing how sociodramatic play can involve both pretending and sharing pretense; (3) "Why Is Complex Play Important?"; (4) "Different Perspectives," focusing on how children realize that others have different views and interpretations; (5) "Negotiation," showing how children negotiate different perspectives within sociodramatic play; (6) "Shared Focus," asserting that children draw upon a shared focus and communication during complex play; (7) "Some Strategies for Supporting Complex Play"; (8) "Providing Shared Experiences"; (9) "Adult Involvement in Play," including a discussion of managing play, modeling negotiation skills, accepting children's play, supporting rather than taking over play, using praise appropriately, and representing the play; and (10) "Supporting Complex Play," on the delicate balance between adults supporting and extending play and dominating play. Contains 14 references. (BGC)

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Developing understanding through play

Sue Dockett

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You make me alive!

Developing understanding through play

Sue Dockett

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Developing understanding through play

The doctor's visit

Dale (4.3) and Jean (4.6) have two teddies wrapped up in doll's beds in the family area.

Jean: *(To teddies.)* He's the doctor. *(Points to Dale.)*

Dale: *(Picks up large bag, places on floor, looks down at the bed.)* I'm gonna ... *(Picks up one bear, turns bear over, looks in 'ears'.)* Now, you go back to bed with your brother.

Jean: Both of 'em sick. They gotta go to sleep.

Dale: Goodnight!
(Picks up bag, goes down stairs.) See ya! *(Comes back up stairs.)* Hello!

Jean: Sick again!

This book focuses on the role of sociodramatic play in the development of young children. The underlying perspective is that children's play can have a significant influence in their development of social understanding. In many instances this influence is possible when adults are aware of the nature of children's pretend play and when adults work actively to promote and extend that play. This means that the role of the adult is important. It is not just a role that relates to setting up the environment for play, but one where adults also consider the interests of children, the direction of the play, and ways in which that play can become more complex.

Complex sociodramatic play

Sociodramatic play can be a complex experience involving the dual aspects of pretending and sharing the pretence. Several studies have indicated that not all children engage in complex sociodramatic play. Those children who do, however, show a greater knowledge about people and interactions.

Part of a complex episode is given above. As this play progresses, the children alternate the roles of doctor and parent, give the teddies an injection, explaining how it will hurt (but that they need to have it) and arrange for the doctor to call again. Through this, the children share a range of understanding and perspectives about doctors, patients, children and parents as they enact a doctor's visit (above).

There are several ways of considering the complexity of pretend play. One method described by Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) involves identifying six essential elements within play episodes.

These elements are:

- imitative role play
- make-believe with objects
- make-believe with actions and situations
- persistence
- interaction
- verbal communication

All of these elements are present to some degree in the play episode above. For example, there was role-play when the children adopted the roles of doctor and parent; make-believe with objects and actions when a stick was used to give the injection; interaction between the players (including non-verbal interaction); verbal communication throughout the episode; and persistence (the episode lasted for over five minutes). Being aware of the elements of sociodramatic play and noting these in observations enables us to consider the complexity of the play and to promote and extend that when appropriate.

Why is complex play important?

When children engage in complex sociodramatic play there are opportunities for them to realise that others have different perspectives; to negotiate about those perspectives and issues; and to develop understanding. These opportunities are important in the cognitive development of young children.

Different perspectives

Children become aware of different perspectives when they realise that others have different ways of thinking about and interpreting things. This awareness is important in predicting and explaining our own actions as well as those of others.

Sociodramatic play provides many opportunities for children to realise that others have different perspectives.

One way in which children become aware of the perspectives of others is through role play where they engage in actions that are consistent with the roles adopted (Cole & LaVoie, 1985). This provides the opportunity for children to investigate and explore their social world and the rules that are applicable to specific roles. When understanding of roles differs, negotiation enables the players to reassess their understanding of these roles.

A great deal of negotiation is often needed if sociodramatic play is to continue

Rubin (1980, p.75) relates an episode where different perspectives on the roles of mother and father had to be resolved for the play to continue.

Father: So long. I'll see ya later. It's time to go to work.

Mother: Hey, wait for me! I gotta go to work too!

Father: Hey, my mum don't work ... you stay here.

Mother: Well my mum works ... lotsa womens work ya know. My Mum is a perfessor at the unibersity.

Father: OK, then, just hurry so we won't be late. Are you sure ya wanna work?

Negotiation

Within sociodramatic play, children have the opportunity to negotiate different perspectives and issues. Often a range of negotiation strategies is used. At times the negotiation occurs within the framework of the play, but at other times players step outside the play to issue guidance or directions (Fein, 1987). Alex uses both of these strategies in the example below.

Feeding the baby

Alex (4.2) and Sarah (4.0) are in the family corner.

Alex: I'm hungry, wah, wah, wah! *(Sits at the table in the kitchen area, hands rubbing his eyes.)*

Sarah: Come on baby, let me feed you. *(Picks up doll's bottle for Alex.)*

Alex: No, Sarah. I'm not a little tiny baby; I'm gonna be a big baby. You're s'posed to feed me with a spoon.

In the next example, Stella and Jane try out a range of strategies such as yelling, measuring who is the taller and calling on their own parents in order to establish who is to be the mother.

I'm the Mum!

Stella (4.8), Jane (4.9) move to the family corner. Stella picks up a wooden spoon and stirs the wok on the stove. Jane stands with her hands on her hips.

Stella: Well, I'm the Mum!

Jane: Well, I'm the mother.

Stella: *(Yelling.)* No!

Jane: I'm the mother.

Stella: An' I be the Mum.

Jane: I'm the mother! *(To Karen, who enters area.)* An' you belong to me! I'm the mother. I'm the mother, OK?

Stella: *(Stands, hands on hips, sighs.)*

Jane: I'm the mother! I'm the mother!

Stella: Am not! I'm the Mum!

Jane: An' I'm the mother too. So! See, I'm bigger 'an you!

Stella: I'm bigger! An', I'm gonna tell my Mum!

Jane: I'm bigger. I show ya. *(Stands next to Stella.)* Look! See, I'm bigger.

Stella: *(Stretches.)* An' I'm big!

Jane: Don't stand on tippy toes, that's not fair! I'm gonna see my Daddy!

There are times when adults will need to step in to help children negotiate. Sociodramatic play, however, provides a purpose and an opportunity for children to try out strategies, to assess the effectiveness of these and to try another approach if the last strategy did not work. Pellegrini (1984) has noted that the presence of an adult may actually discourage children from attempting to negotiate among themselves.

Shared focus

When involved in complex play, children draw upon a shared focus and communicate within the context of this focus. It is this that Vygotsky (1978) suggests helps create a leading edge of development: with the help of others who are more skilled, children can operate at a higher level than they would have on their own. When they have a shared focus, children may engage in shared problem solving, again being able to work through and solve problems in ways which may not be possible on their own.

Within any group of children, whether a peer group or a mixed age group, some children will be more skilled in particular ways, and will have a different understanding of issues. Because of these differences, children may act as a resource for each other, providing the opportunity to assist and challenge each other. The result is often shared problem solving as in the interaction of Warren and Max below. Warren is searching for his missing steam roller and Max suggests a range of strategies to help him find it. It is unlikely that Max would have pursued the same course of action on his own.

These children have a shared focus in their play as they enact a script related to 'mothers and babies'

The roller-coaster

Warren (4.0) is digging in the sandpit. Max (4.11) joins him.

Warren: You can help me see if my roller-coaster's there. *(Both dig.)*

Max: There's a car over there. Is that it?

Warren: Na.

Max: I'm trying to find, um, Warren's roller-coaster. Move Carol. That's where the hole's gotta dig. Move! Get outta the way!

Ricky: Can I come in?

Max: Yeah. We gotta find his roller-coaster. D'you remember where you put it? You gotta think about it, you know.

Warren: Mmmm. Yeah, it was there. I put it over there.

Max: Sure?

Warren: Yeah. Making a big hole. Don't look down!

Max: You're silly Warren. How'd ya lose your roller-coaster?

Warren: Easy, I just wanted to put it in there an' wash it out, cause it was making the road. An' I'm trying to find it now.

Max: Well ... was it over here, or over here? *(Moves to other side of sandpit.)*

Warren: Maybe down this way ...

Max: I'm gonna try an' feel it. *(Puts hand in hole, digs with hand.)* Here! I found it. *(Pulls out a toy steam roller.)* I thought you said it was your roller coaster?

Warren: Yep.

Max: It's your steam roller!

In summary, when engaged in complex sociodramatic play, children have opportunities for negotiation, for taking the perspectives of others, and for developing a shared focus in play. Each of these aspects of play adds to children's understanding of themselves and others.

Some strategies for supporting complex play

There are many strategies that may be used to actively encourage and support complex sociodramatic play. In a series of recent observations (Dockett, 1994a) the following strategies were noted.

Providing shared experiences

One approach pioneered by Smilansky is based on children's involvement in shared experiences. This method was adopted in some recent research (Dockett, 1994b) when a group of children visited a pizza restaurant and then re-enacted and extended the events of the visit in their play. When all the players have some shared experience, and where they are able to use this as the basis for developing a shared focus within their play, it seems much easier for them to work out what is going on, what roles are appropriate and how these are enacted, as well as how they can enter and continue the play.

The following example is part of an episode that lasted for a total of 80 minutes. Some children stayed with the play for this entire time; others moved in and out of the play on several occasions. This movement was possible because the children were aware of different roles they could adopt, and different ways in which they could be involved in the play.

Pizza play

A group of four-and-a-half-year old children are at the dough table.

Lisa: I'm gonna make pizza now. Pizza for my Mum. *(Picks up phone, receiver to ear, hangs up.)* That was my Mum. She said she wants pizza.

Stella: *(Walks to table, notepad and pencil in hand.)* What do you want?

Julie: *(Seated at table.)* Garlic bread. Um, an' pizza.

Stella: Well, we've run out of pizza.

Dale: Ring, ring. Ring, ring.

Stella: *(Picks up phone.)* OK, one minute, OK. *(Hangs up.)*

Julie: Where's our pizza?

Jena: *(Sits near Julie.)* I'll have a cheese one.

Julie: *(Nods.)* Yeah, cheese.

Jena: We're both having cheese.

Julie: With pineapple!

Dale: *(Sits at table.)* I want pepperoni.

(Stella delivers a tray of play dough to the table.)

Julie: I think it's your pizza. *(Passes it to Dale.)* Where's our pizza?

Jena: I'm gonna ask where our pizza is. *(Walks to dough table, approaches Robert.)* Where's our pizza?

Robert: *(At table rolling out dough.)* It's gone.

Jena: *(Returns to table.)* I think they forget about us.

(Robert delivers a tray of play dough to the table.)

Jena: Here's our pizza! Gotta cut it into pieces. *(Picks up cutter.)* Now I gonna be the pizza man, an' get all the pizza.

Not all shared experiences have to involve excursions, nor do they have to involve a large group of children. Some complex play has resulted from shared readings and enactment of favourite stories with small groups of children (Singer & Singer, 1985), and by having children retell or create their own stories which are then acted out (see Paley, 1984). What is important in the shared experience is a joint focus of attention and the desire of the players to communicate about what is happening. This is more likely to occur when a group of children have participated in the same, or similar experiences and then have the opportunity to continue that focus in play.

Adult involvement in play

Managing the play

Adults have an important role in supporting play. Part of this role is described by Jones and Reynolds (1992) as that of 'stage manager', where adults provide the time, space and materials for play. Without the relevant props to support play, and the time and space for play to develop, complex episodes would probably not occur.

The amount of time within a program that is allocated to play is an indicator to adults and children of how important play is. If there is only a short period of time for play, the implication is that it is not a very important thing to do. Short periods of time allocated to play also work against the development of complex play. Christie and Wardle (1992) recommend that short periods of play be combined into longer periods, so that there is a greater likelihood of complex play developing. And planning the environment so that children can come back to things they have not yet finished is just as important as planning for sufficient time to play, be it throughout the day or from day to day.

Providing props is also a feature of the stage manager's role. There needs to be a balance of familiar and new props: things that will get the play started and help it continue, but also things that are familiar enough for children to know what to do with them. If the aim of the play is to

Providing props is one important aspect of the adult's role in encouraging sociodramatic play

foster negotiation, there needs to be sufficient props to encourage children to play, but not so many that all children can play on their own with little or no interaction.

While the role of stage manager is important, this alone is often not enough to promote complex play. Some further support from adults is often needed.

Modelling negotiation skills

There will be times when adults need to step in to resolve conflicts, especially when children are in danger of hurting themselves or others, or where the processes and strategies adopted by the children are not working. In these instances, the adult can model appropriate strategies that children could use in future. Focusing only on rules that have been broken, or sending children away to a time-out chair does not help children work out what they should do next time. It does label the children as unable to play properly, and, if it is a common occurrence, is likely to encourage children to seek out adults to solve conflicts in the future.

Accepting children's play

Often children adopt themes in their play that make adults feel uncomfortable. One reaction is to 'ban' this type of play, or to try to redirect it. One example observed was children's play which focused on death and dying. The children returned to the theme of death in their play over several weeks and a number of parents expressed concern to the teacher and asked her to change the focus of their play. Rather than banning this play, however, the teacher observed and noted how it progressed, realising that the children were using the play to understand a range of issues and accepting that the children had quite a different concept of death from the adults. She accepted the play as important to the children concerned, but observed it carefully so that she could intervene should this become necessary.

When adult understanding and values are placed upon children's play, the interpretation is often quite removed from the understanding being constructed by the children. In the example mentioned, the children equated dying with falling over. They had established some connection between being shot and dying, but all those who had died simply got up and resumed their play. Although such play themes may make us feel uncomfortable, children use this play to come to terms with a range of issues.

Supporting rather than taking over the play

It is sometimes difficult for adults to resist the urge to 'teach' a particular concept or idea through play. There may be opportunities within play to point out connections to children, to reinforce learning about a particular concept, or to challenge children to make a range of new connections. However, there is also the possibility that such intervention changes the nature of the play. Part of the essential nature of play is that it is owned and controlled by the children involved and that it relates to issues that are relevant and meaningful for them. An adult who takes over the situation is not helping to extend or complicate it, as is seen in the following example, where two children were discussing clouds.

Clouds

Chris (4.3) and Bill (4.6) are watching the sky get darker.

Chris: The clouds are getting a bit black. It's going to rain.

Bill: No, it won't. It will be sunny.

Chris: See, the clouds are moving. They move so they can get space.

Bill: No, they move when there is planes.

Chris: An' they can make into animals.

Bill: An' do you know why they are moving? The clouds are letting the sun go. Let it come out. That's why they moving. They trying to get the sun out! *(Laughs.)*

Matthew: *(Joins, looks towards sky as others are doing.)* Mmmn, black black clouds.

Teacher: What do they tell us?

Matthew: Nothin'. They don't tell us nothin'. 'Cause they got no mouths.

(All children run off, chasing each other.)

Entering the play

There are times when the adult directly enters the play of the children. Sometimes this will be successful; at other times it serves to stop the play rather than to support it, as in the previous example. Further, there are times when adult involvement in play is unsettling for the children concerned, as they try to establish what is expected of them when an adult joins their play.

When children are unsure of their role or involvement in play, adults may help them enter play or create a setting in which a number of children can follow the suggestions for a particular theme or topic of play. Adults may model roles of make-believe situations, or use verbal guidance to encourage play (Christie, 1982). Shared experiences, with some initial guidance from the adult, may also help the development and maintenance of play.

Having the adult as a player may be a good way to get play started. If the adult remains as a player, however, it is possible that the play will revolve around them, and that children will follow the adult's lead rather than owning and creating the play themselves. This may be appropriate in the early stages of play but can be limiting for the children involved.

In one observation, an adult visiting a preschool sat down at the dough table where the children were making their own pizzas and started to make her own. She cut dough into precise shapes to represent tomato and pepperoni and showed this to the children. The children then all

wanted the adult to make the shapes for them, complaining that only she could make them properly. The power of the adult as a model is clear in this case.

Adult involvement in play may add complexity to the play, depending on the nature of the involvement. In all instances, the adult needs to judge the appropriate time and means for entry into the play, as well as ways in which ownership may be retained by the children while the adult role is relinquished.

Focusing on the play, not the rules

Children often break the rules within their play. When teachers focus on this and not the play, it is likely that play will cease or at least be curtailed (Jones & Reynolds, 1992). In the example of death and dying, several parents were concerned that the teacher had not intervened to stop the play. The concern grew when the same parents saw the children using sticks and poking them at others, and then taking sand from the sandpit to sprinkle on the 'dead' children to 'make them come alive' (the children explained that the sand was 'magic' and when it was sprinkled on the 'dead' person, it made them 'come alive' again).

Again, the teacher could have interrupted the play and reminded the children that the sand was to remain in the sandpit and that sticks were not appropriate playthings at preschool. The teacher in this case chose not to do this, preferring instead to let children work through the issues which were of concern to them and to resolve dilemmas in a way that was relevant and meaningful for them. She did, though, make sure that she was near at hand should she be needed.

Other instances where rules are cited as the reason for intervening in play often involve superhero play or gun play. While there is a difference between rough-and-tumble play and aggression (Pellegrini & Perlmutter, 1988), it is often the case that interrupting play to remind children of rules serves more to encourage children to work around the rules than to promote a deep understanding of the issues involved, as in the following example.

The magic wand

Alex (4.2) is running across the playground with a small shovel pushed into the waist of his shorts.

Adult: Alex, what are you doing with that shovel? You know we don't have guns at preschool.

Alex: *(Pulls shovel from his shorts.)*
But this isn't a gun. It's a magic wand, see.
(Waves shovel around in the air.) See, magic! An' it's a magic wand what can shoot ya, eh eh eh eh.
(Shooting sounds.)

Complex sociodramatic play is an important learning experience

Using praise appropriately

As educators of young children, most of us rely on praise as a means of suggesting appropriate behaviours and of acknowledging the effort made by children. What we often do not realise is that praise, used inappropriately or insincerely, can effectively put an end to play and lead to conformity in play.

For example, the comment 'that's great' in response to a collage, painting, story or any other creation, leaves the child with no real direction in the conversation. In contrast, the comment 'that's a really interesting use of colour there', or 'I could see you were working with Joel when you did this. How did you put it all together?' opens up many avenues for interaction as well as recognising the interests of the children in the play and offering some extensions.

Representing the play

One of the roles that is often overlooked involves representing the play of children (Jones & Reynolds, 1992). There will be times when a record of the play can be made and referred to at a later date. Such information may be used as the trigger for future play, as the starting point for recollections and discussions about the play, as the basis for future planning, or in discussions with children and parents. Within the early years of school in particular, teachers may develop written records of the play by scribing the stories of children, recording the plot that was enacted, noting where the story has developed and where it could commence next time, or by adding captions or stories to the drawings children have made about their play. Teachers may also keep visual records through the use of photographs, drawings, charts, or displays of certain props or equipment.

These also provide a range of documentation about the play of children that can form the basis of reports to the children, families and other educators. When combined with regular observations, this data provides a much more accurate picture of children and their developing competencies than does a 'one-off' test or assessment task.

Supporting complex play

If the aim is to support complex sociodramatic play among children, it is clear that setting up an environment and then standing back waiting for play to occur is not enough. Complex sociodramatic play is more likely to occur if an adult shows an interest in the area, at least initially, and then supports that play when needed.

While there is a delicate balance between stepping in to support and extend play and taking over, it is important for adults to engage in the play in some way. Successful avenues for this involvement include making comments, asking questions or presenting challenges that relate to the roles adopted by children in ways that offer possible extensions of play. An important thing about these comments, question and challenges is that they address the roles adopted by the children, and encourage them to problem-solve, negotiate and to consider perspectives other than their own.

Being involved in complex sociodramatic play is an important learning experience which contributes to young children's developing understanding of their world and the people in it. In keeping with this, children who engage in complex sociodramatic play are thought to benefit most from the experience. As adults who recognise and value play, there are a range of strategies we can use to promote complex play. These include providing:

- shared experiences for groups of children;
- opportunities to build upon those experiences in play;
- time, space and materials to engage in complex play;
- a mixture of familiar and novel materials for play;
- acceptance of children's play scripts and themes wherever possible;
- a model of appropriate negotiation and mediation strategies;
- opportunities for children to negotiate and practise conflict resolution; and
- situations in which children's understandings are challenged and extended.

Further, adults can:

- participate in play in meaningful and relevant ways;
- observe the complexity of play that occurs;
- get to know the children through their play;
- document the nature and complexity of chidlren's play;
- appreciate and value complex play; and
- encourage complexity within children's play.

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